SPORT

Gulzar clinches bronze at Islamic Solidarity Games

RIYADH: Pakistani wrestler Mohammad Gulzar won a bronze medal in the 97 kg category at the Islamic Solidarity Games in Riyadh on Friday, dedicating his victory to the country's armed forces.

Gulzar secured the medal by defeating Turkiye's Rifat E. Gidak in the fall position 5-4. The wrestler had earlier overcome Afghanistan's Iqbal Ahmed in the repechage round to advance to the bronze medal contest.

Iranian wrestler Amirali Azarpira won the gold medal after a dominant 5-0 win against Kazakhstan's Rizabek Aitmukhan.

Following his win, Gulzar announced he would dedicate the medal to the Pakistan Army's 'Banyan-e-Marsoos' operation, stating that the victory was for his "homeland, its defenders and martyrs."

The Pakistan Wrestling Federation had organised a three-month intensive training camp in Gujranwala to prepare for the games, with coach Inam Butt providing guidance.

"We learned a lot in this camp, and Allah Almighty rewarded us for our hard work," said Pakistan Wrestling Federation president Arshad Sattar. "This victory is a source of pride for the entire Pakistan."

In other wrestling events, Pakistan's Inayatullah missed out on the 74kg quarter-finals after a loss to Bahrain's Magomedrasul Asluev. Meanwhile, Mohammad Abdullah was defeated 10-0 by Uzbekistan's Umidjon Jalolov in the round-of-16 of the 65kg category.

The wrestling bronze brings Pakistan's total medal haul at the games to five.

The other medals include a gold won by star javelin thrower Arshad Nadeem, a silver by Yasir Sultan in the same competition and two additional bronze medals from boxers Faitma Zahra and Qudratullah.—Agencies

BOLOGNA: Spain's Pedro Martinez Portero (back) and Marcel Granollers-Pujol in action against the Czech Republic's pair of Tomas Machac and Jakub Mensik during their Davis Cup quarter-final at the Super Tennis Arena.—AFP

Spain, Germany win to set up Davis Cup semi-final

BOLOGNA: Spain bounced back from an opening singles defeat on Thursday to beat the Czech Republic 2-1 and reach the Davis Cup semi-finals for the first time in six years where they will face Germany, who earned their own comeback win over Argentina.

The Spaniards, without world number one Carlos Alcaraz after he pulled out on the eve of the event with a hamstring injury, had their backs against the wall when Pablo Carreno Busta was beaten in straight sets by Jakub Mensik.

Carreno Busta, ranked 89th, had no response to Mensik's power and 20 aces, going down 7-5, 6-4 to the world No. 19.

Mensik suffered a break midway through the first set but held tough and broke back twice to bag it. He gave away no other break opportunities, snatching the second set with a late break of his own to put his team in front.

Even without Alcaraz, Spain had enough quality to stage a successful comeback, with Jaume Munar drawing them level with a 6-3, 6-4 win over Jiri Lehecka. Munar, who earned his first Davis Cup win, needed a break in each set to get past his opponent.

It then came down to the doubles match with 39-year-old veteran Marcel Granollers and Pedro Martinez edging past Mensik and Tomas Machac 7-6(10/8), 7-6(10/8) in an entertaining encounter.

Argentina's Tomas Etcheverry fired 23 aces to earn a straight-sets victory over Jan-Lennart Struff in the last quarter-final of the day, but the Germans responded with Alexander Zverev's 6-4, 7-6(7/3) victory over Francisco Cerundolo to send the tie into yet another doubles decider.

There was drama in the decider that lasted almost two and a half hours. Argentina's Horacio Zeballos and Andres Molteni saved four match points but wasted two themselves in the third set tiebreak before Germany's Kevin Krawietz and Tim Puetz battled back to a 4-6, 6-4, 7-6(12/10) victory to send their team to the last four.

In the other semi-final, hosts Italy, who are also missing world number two Jannik Sinner and world number eight Lorenzo Musetti, are eyeing a Davis Cup "three-peat" after easing past Austria in Bologna on Wednesday to set up a semi-final clash against Belgium.—Reuters

Records tumble at national swimming championship

ISLAMABAD: The 24th girls and 29th boys national age group swimming championships commenced on Friday with records tumbling all around here at the Pakistan Sports Complex swimming pool.

As many as 44 events were contested on the opening day of the championships which featured age categories of Under-10, Under-12, Under-14 and Under-16.

Team Navy had the most successful day in the Under-10 category of the girls' section as they won they three gold medals while Sindh secured three silvers and Punjab won two bronze medals.

Jannan Nimra Majid won the first gold for Navy in the 50 metre breaststroke category with a time of 48.59 seconds while departmentmate Minhal Noman claimed first place in the 50 metre butterfly with a time of 40.11 seconds.

Navy later went on to set a new record in the 4x50m medley relay, clocking 2:55.28. Sindh finished second (2:57.28) and Punjab third (3:11.20).

In the Under-12 girls' events, Zoya Omair Hafiz of Sindh set two new national records: one in the 100m butterfly (1:16.20) and another in the 50m butterfly (32.85 seconds).

Eden Haseeb of Wapda made a new national record in the U-12 girls' 200m freestyle, finishing in 2:31.75. A new record was also set in the U-12 girls' 4x100m medley relay with a time of 5:36.20.

The U-14 girls' category saw Rani Adnan of Punjab establishing a new record in the 100m butterfly while team Sindh set a national record in the 4x100m relay (5:13.55) in the U-16 girls' category. In boys' events, Punjab's team set a new national record in the U-10 4x50m relay, finishing in 2:35.31. Syed M. Daniyal Hatim of Army set a record in the U-10 boys' 50m butterfly (26.9 seconds).—Sports Reporter

'Politically motivated': National champion slams cycling's exclusion from Games

By Our Sports Reporter

KARACHI: As the first draft of the competition schedule of the upcoming National Games was shared, there was one glaring omission: the sport of cycling. At the heart of its absence from the Games, scheduled to be held in Karachi from Dec 6 to 13, is a long-running dispute over the legitimacy of the Pakistan Cycling Federation and the politics at play.

"As the organising secretary, I've not received any complaint [over cycling's exclusion]," Ahmed Ali Rajpoot, the secretary general of the Sindh Olympic Association, which is organising the Games under the Pakistan Olympic Association, told *Dawn* on Thursday.

Pressed further for a reason why it has been dropped, he added: "There is a dispute in the cycling body ... and we want to ensure smooth organisation of the Games."

Unlike Ahmed's version of events, though, there is huge uproar in the country's cycling community over its exclusion from the biennial sporting extravaganza with national road cycling champion Ali Ilyas terming the move "unprecedented".

"At a time when we are proving our mettle at international events, this doesn't make sense at all," said Ali, who clinched the Masters title at the Asian Road and Para Cycling Championships in Thailand earlier this year, told *Dawn* on Thursday. "This is a politically motivated decision."

The POA does not recognise the PCF led by Azhar Ali Shah, which has recognition from the sport's global governing body UCI and the Pakistan Sports Board.

In a long-running saga, that has affected the sport for over a decade, the POA's election commission held an election for the PCF in October last year which saw Idrees Haider Khawaja elected as president.

It provoked a strong rebuke from UCI and Azhar.

"The POA decided to do away with cycling altogether from the National Games because it cannot allow the parallel body to organise it as it will draw the ire of the UCI, while allowing the Azhar-led PCF to hold it would give them their rightful legitimacy," said Ali, who is firmly behind Azhar.

Ali rued that he was initially told that cycling had been removed from the programme since there was no velodrome for the track events in Karachi.

"They're just excuses," he said. "They could've held road cycling events in Karachi easily like the PCF has done three times in the last five years," he said, adding that there was already a precedent to hold track cycling events in Lahore. "At the last National Games in Quetta two years ago, cycling was altogether held in Lahore."

Azhar, meanwhile, rued that it is a continuation of the powerplay that is depriving cyclists of participation at the National Games.

"We've been forced to sit out and watch from the sidelines at any event where the POA has to send entries," he told *Dawn*. "At the ongoing Islamic Solidarity Games [in Saudi Arabia], I'm pretty sure that Ali would've returned with gold but it is because of the POA stance that he missed out. The same is happening at the National Games."

Norris tops red-flagged second practice for Las Vegas GP

LAS VEGAS: Championship leader Lando Norris went fastest in Thursday's second practice for the Las Vegas Grand Prix in a session disrupted by two red flags, one for a loose manhole cover.

The Briton, who boasts a 24-point lead over McLaren team-mate Oscar Piastri in the driver standings, completed his hot lap just before crimson fury struck the Las Vegas Strip.

Norris was quickest around the 6.201-km street circuit with a lap of 1min 33.602secs — 0.029sec ahead of Mercedes' Kimi Antonelli.

Moments later, the session was red-flagged to check a a manhole cover.

Cars returned to the track with six minutes remaining, time enough for Charles Leclerc of Ferrari to end his session early with a gearbox issue, before a final red flag definitively curtailed the action.

"We didn't manage to get too much from FP2 given the disruption, but we did get a slightly better feeling than in FP1," said Norris, who was sixth in opening practice.

"We made some good progress and we've got a reasonable feeling altogether. Some positives to build on and some areas to try and improve."

Monaco's Leclerc was third in a session where many of the drivers did not have a soft tyre run, including Piastri, who was 14th and 0.891 adrift of title rival Norris.

Australian Piastri, who was 34 points clear in the standings after winning the Dutch Grand Prix in August, has not managed a podium finish in the past five races.

While Norris cannot secure the world championship crown this weekend, he could doom the repeat bid of four-time defending champion Max Verstappen, the Dutchman entering 49 points adrift.

Verstappen was ninth in his Red Bull in the second session, 0.503 off the pace.

Leclerc set the fastest time in first practice in 1:34.802 with Thailand's Alexander Albon second for Williams and Japan's Yuki Tsunoda of Red Bull third.

A lack of grip marked the opening session on the Las Vegas strip as many cars skidded or failed to brake in some corners, Norris touching a wall but getting away with it.—AFP

MCLAREN'S Lando Norris of Great Britain drives during practice ahead of the Formula One Grand Prix of Las Vegas at the Las Vegas Strip Circuit. —AFP

'FIFA Series' to expand in 2026

ZURICH: The second "FIFA Series", sponsored biennial tournaments for mainly lower-ranked and lesser-financed nations, will expand in 2026 and launch a new women's edition, the global governing body said on Friday.

Though some games in the first 24-nation series in 2024 were sparsely attended, others did spark big fan interest, with more than 85,000 turning up for Egypt's finale against Croatia in Cairo.

Host nations for the larger 2026 men's series are Australia, Azerbaijan, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Mauritius, Puerto Rico, Rwanda and Uzbekistan, FIFA said, with the final line-up of participants to be given early in the year.

The women's series will debut in Brazil, Ivory Coast and Thailand.

The aim is to benefit national teams lacking opportunities to play teams from other continents, with FIFA contributing to travel costs, accommodation and other logistics.—Reuters

Hamza, Saqib dazzle

LAHORE: FG/Din sealed their place in the main final after a thrilling victory over Diamond Paints/Din while SQ Seagold/Newage Cables routed Sula Polo to reach the subsidiary final of the SQ Seagold Gold Polo Cup here at the Lahore Polo Club ground on Friday.

Six brilliant goals by Hamza Mawaz Khan helped FG/Din edge out Diamond Paints/Din 7-6. Mian Abbas Mukhtar added the seventh for the winners. Diamond Paints/Din fought valiantly, led by the outstanding Raja Jalal Arsalan, who scored four goals while Mir Huzaifa Ahmed contributed two.

In the other match, a superb six-goal show by Saqib Khan Khakwani steered SQ Seagold/Newage Cables to an emphatic 8-1 victory over Sula Polo.

Shiraz Qureshi added two more to complete the commanding win. Sula Polo's only goal came through Raja Sami.

FG/Din meet Master paints in the main final while SQ Seagold/Newage Cables face see HK Polo in the subsidiary final on Sunday.—Sports Reporter

Arsenal brace for Spurs clash without Gabriel, City in pursuit

LONDON: Arsenal will be without defensive lynchpin Gabriel Magalhaes when they host London rivals Tottenham Hotspur on Sunday as Manchester City seek to keep up the pressure on the Premier League leaders.

Pep Guardiola's City could cut the Gunners' lead at the top of the table to just one point, at least for 24 hours, if they beat Newcastle United on Saturday.

Reigning champions Liverpool desperately need a win after five defeats in their last six Premier League matches, while Rob Edwards takes charge of his first match as Wolverhampton Wanderers manager.

Arsenal boss Mikel Arteta has a major headache as he considers how to reshuffle his defence against Spurs in the absence of the injured Gabriel.

The Brazilian has been at the heart of the near-impregnable Gunners back line that has conceded just five goals in 11 Premier League matches.

But Arteta confirmed on Friday that the defender will miss "weeks" of action after picking up an injury during international duty.

"Gabi is going to be out for weeks," said Arteta, who added that the defender will have another scan next week.

Gabriel, who has formed a formidable central defensive partnership with William Saliba and is also a threat from set-pieces, is likely to be replaced by Piero Hincapie or Cristhian Mosquera.

The Gunners are four points clear of City after they drew 2-2 with Sunderland earlier this month, ending a streak of eight wins in all competitions with no goals conceded.

Arsenal remain favourites to secure a first Premier League title since 2003/04 and have an eye-catching record against their London rivals — losing just once in the league at home to Tottenham since 1993.

But Spurs travel to the Emirates boasting the best away record in the league this season — with four wins and a draw from five games.

The other London club Chelsea will also be without their star player Cole Palmer for their match against Burnley on Saturday.

Palmer, who was close to a comeback from a groin injury, has fractured a toe in an accident at home that will keep him out of this month's key matches against visiting Barcelona and Arsenal, manager Enzo Maresca said on Friday.

The England international suffered the groin injury in August but returned to action the following month with back-to-back goals against Brentford and Bayern Munich.

But Palmer was then forced off injured at Manchester United, prompting Maresca to rest him to recover, and has now stubbed the small toe on his left foot on a door during the night.

"He's probably not available for tomorrow [at Burnley] for sure, Barcelona for sure or Arsenal for sure. Unfortunately, he had an accident at home where he hit his toe. It's nothing important, but he won't be back in the next week," the Chelsea boss told reporters.

Meanwhile, Liverpool need quick fix Liverpool's hopes of a successful title defence appear to be over after five defeats in six games left them eight points behind leaders Arsenal.

Sports analytics company Opta puts the champions' chances of winning the league at just over seven per cent, following their 3-0 humbling by Manchester City before the international break.

Liverpool face Nottingham Forest, the only team who beat them at home last season, on Saturday with Arne Slot's men desperate to put their recent woes behind them.

The Reds' issues have been well documented but Liverpool's biggest problem is their leaky defence, which has so far conceded at least two goals in six of their past seven league games.

Former Liverpool defender Jamie Carragher has warned the club could even miss out on Champions League qualification if they fail to strengthen their defence in the January transfer window.

Reports this week suggest they remain interested in signing Crystal Palace defender Marc Guehi after a deal collapsed on transfer deadline day, but Liverpool need an immediate improvement.

On the other side, Newcastle are languishing in 14th spot in the Premier League, with just three wins this season, as they prepare to welcome City to St James' Park on Saturday.

"It's been difficult to pinpoint one thing but certainly we know we have to improve the general performances," Newcastle manager Eddie Howe told the BBC. "We're looking for more consistency — we're looking for more goals. We're looking for a big response in this moment."

Howe would not have chosen City as his opponents this weekend. Pep Guardiola's men have not lost to the Magpies in the league, either home or away, since 2019.

Some sections of the northeast side's fan base are disgruntled but Howe will surely be given the benefit of the doubt by club chiefs after winning the League Cup last season and qualifying for the Champions League.

Fixtures:

Saturday (1500 GMT unless stated): Burnley v Chelsea (1230), Bournemouth v West Ham United, Brighton and Hove Albion v Brentford, Fulham v Sunderland, Liverpool v Nottingham Forest, Wolverhampton Wanderers v Crystal Palace, Newcastle United v Manchester City (1730).

Sunday: Leeds United v Aston Villa (1400), Arsenal v Tottenham Hotspur (1630).

Monday: Manchester United v Everton (2000). —Agencies